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## Can One Not Ask and Not Tell About "Don't Ask and Don't Tell"?

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Title: Can One Not Ask and Not Tell About "Don't Ask and Don't Tell"?

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**Abstract.** This article describes the psychologies of asking and telling as an impediment to the United States Department of Defense personnel policy of "Don't Ask and Don't Tell."

During the first Clinton Administration, the United States (US) Department of Defense (DOD) began to implement a personnel policy that--for the first time--would formally acknowledge that homosexuals could serve and would be serving in uniform. The essence of the policy is that individuals are not to be asked about their sexual orientation and are not to divulge their sexual orientation--in the latter case only if the individual is homosexual.

As can be easily seen, the policy has its own seeds of self-destruction: if one does not divulge one's sexual orientation, one logically might well be homosexual--for only homosexuals formally cannot "tell" of their sexual orientation. (Of course, one might just be shy, modest, or characterized by a sexual orientation deviant enough for it not yet to have come to the formal attention of DOD or higher civilian authorities.)

Less easily seen are two other destructive seeds: the psychologies of telling and asking. As the word tells, so can behavior. Types of nonverbal, vocal communicative modes--e.g., articulation, pitch and amplitude of voice--can tell sexual orientation in some cases. So can manners of dress. So can choices of friends and associates. And choices of restaurants, bars, various extra-curricular activities. Yes, there are "false positives" and "false negatives" in ascribing behaviors to sexual orientation. Even engaging in same-sex sexual behavior only suggests, not constitutes, sexual orientation. But what's more, even telling through the word has false positives and false negatives. That is, one can state that one is a homosexual but not be homosexual. The psychologies of telling suggest that DOD policymakers and implementors are reifying the word and some aspects of sexual or sexual-related behavior as "supreme tellers."

The psychologies of asking also form a destructive seed of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy. Can one not ask? Given psychological research that rationally and empirically explicates how individuals construct and perceive, one might well conclude that asking is part of perceiving. This asking takes the form of implicit and explicit spontaneous hypothesis-making and testing and is applied to perceptions of shape, size, color, as well as the many aspects of social life, including sexual orientation. One might not overtly ask via the word but one inevitably asks via concatenations of cognition, affect, and motivation. DOD policymakers and implementors are denying all nonverbal asking--again--through reifying the word of asking.

In conclusion, most opponents and supporters of the DOD policy are basing their opinions on superficial rationales. The former claim that the policy has been impelling witch hunts and sexual orientation-related discharges beyond what occurred before the policy was put in place. The latter reject this contention and state that personnel who wish to leave the military are using the policy for quick exits. In actuality, the policy ascribes abstract features to telling and asking--features that are overridden by concrete reality. One cannot not tell and cannot not ask--about sex and much else in life. (See Brill, N. Q.

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(1998). Is homosexuality normal? *Journal of Psychiatry & Law*, 26, 219-259; DOD Issues more guidelines on homosexual conduct policy. (August 16, 1999). <http://www.af.mil/news>; DOD modifies 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy. (August 16, 1999). <http://www.af.mil/news>; Kite, M. E., & Whitley, B. E., Jr. (1996). Sex differences in attitudes toward homosexual persons, behaviors, and civil rights: A meta-analysis, *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, 22, 336-353; Oldham, J. D., & Kasser, T. (1999). Attitude change in response to information that male homosexuality has a biological basis. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 25, 121-124; Shenon, P. (August 13, 1999). Pentagon moving to end abuses of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy. *The New York Times*, p. A1; A12; Smith, G., Kippax, S., & Chapple, M. (1998). Secrecy, disclosure, and closet dynamics, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 35, 53-73.) (Keywords: Defense, Homosexuality, Personnel Policy.)